

VZCZCXRO2791
OO RUEHDBU RUEHPW RUEHSL
DE RUEHBUL #2348/01 2261519
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
O 141519Z AUG 09
FM AMEMBASSY KABUL
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 0813
INFO RUCNAFG/AFGHANISTAN COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RHEHAAA/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 KABUL 002348

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [AF](#)

SUBJECT: AFGHAN ELECTIONS: SNAPSHOTS FROM THE MOSQUES

¶1. (SBU) Summary: On August 14, the last Friday before elections, and four days before the August 18 "blackout" on campaign activities begins, some mosques are making a final push to encourage voters to go to the polls - while others are conveying the message that democracy undermines the power of the ulema, or religious elite. Overall, Afghanistan's mosques reflect local concerns, and they are not subsumed under a centralized control. Customarily venues to discuss current events as well as places of worship, mosques are part of the campaign scene. End Summary.

A National Perspective

¶2. (U) According to Mohamed Aref Rahmani, Senior Advisor to the Ministry of Hajj and Islamic Affairs, Afghanistan has 3,500 "official" mosques and over 200,000 unregulated ones. Official mosques have salaried mullahs and respond to state control, and the message in these mosques is supposed to be only that voting is an important duty of democracy. Rahmani also told us that Afghanistan's democracy is new and many mullahs also probably preach their personal preferences. Mosques are a place to discuss current affairs, and the state of the country, he explained.

Wardak - Mixed Messages

¶3. (U) According to PRT Wardak, the messages in the local mosques are varied. Some mullahs are urging people to vote and insist that the elections are a positive step. However, in areas of the province where security is more of a concern, the message tends to be more negative and the elections continue to take a back seat to the local population's concerns.

Paktia Mullahs Urge Residents to Vote

¶4. (U) In Paktika, the Provincial Elections Officer told PRT Paktika that the mullahs in Sharana are generally positive about the elections and are emphasizing that there is nothing in Islam that says one should not vote. In Khair Kot and Orgun districts of Paktika, mullahs are underscoring the importance of the elections for Afghanistan's future and are encouraging their followers to vote for whomever they think is best for the country.

Zabul: Message Reflects Local-National Power Struggle

¶5. (U) According to PRT Zabul, mullahs in a number of mosques in the province, including in the capital, Qalat, have preached anti-elections sermons over the past few

months, perhaps because these mullahs consider the central government a threat to their power base. To the PRT,s knowledge, there have been no pro-elections or pro-government sermons and today's sermons ignored the subject. On a separate note, Zabul hosted its first visit by a major candidate, Ashraf Ghani, on August 14.

Helmand: A Pashtun Message Dominates

¶6. (U) According to the PRT in Helmand, the most common messages from local mullahs is that people must vote because the future of the Pashtun people is at stake and that they must sure a Pashtun president leads the nation. From Helmand,s Hazara community, however, the message seems to be a more generic one, i.e., that it's their national duty to vote. According to PRT reporting, some Karzai supporters showed up at the national mosque with large amounts of fruit and food to distribute to worshipers.

Badghis: Criticism of Karzai's Record

¶7. (U) According to PRT Badghis, the mullahs have been encouraging people and their families to vote on election day. Some mullahs are also criticizing Karzai,s administration for its lack of attention to Badghis and its failure to deliver on campaign promises during the last presidential election. On August 13, the director of the line ministry for Hajj and Islamic Affairs in Badghis, Mullah

KABUL 00002348 002 OF 002

Malawi Nehmani, was arrested while he was meeting with a large gathering of other mullahs from ulema councils throughout Badghis. Reportedly the chief prosecutor arrested him for alleged corruption and because he had made anti-government statements during a speech at an IEC-hosted event. Nehmani had campaigned for Karzai in 2004, but has since become disaffected with the president because he has been remiss on his commitments to the province. Approximately 200 people, largely mullahs, protested Nehami,s arrest in front of Qal-e-Naw,s largest local mosque and he was released soon thereafter. During the August 14 Friday prayers, another renowned mullah, Muhaedi, suggested that elections are inconsistent with Islam, which mandates that ulema representatives and educated elders should select the president.

Herat

¶8. (SBU) PRT Herat reports that, according to local press, President Karzai,s brother Mahmood attended the weekly meeting of the Provincial Ulema Shura on August 11, chaired by Mullah Khodadad, who is a strong supporter of Karzai,s reelection. Local RTA news on August 11 reported that Mahmood told the assembled ulema, comprising both Sunni and Shi,a members, that President Karzai will increase the number of madrassahs in his next five-year plan and that the Ulema Shura has voiced its support for Karzai. PRT Heart believes RTA may have overstated the extent of ulema support for President Karzai, although Mullah Khodadad has been actively working to gain their support for Karzai.

EIKENBERRY